

Life is nothing but a bitter truth. Hidden beneath layers of the intricate lies of motivational speeches, much invisible to the naked eye, these truths come not at once. Rather, they ascend from heaven in moments of realisation, on full moon nights, when the tides are high and wolves are howling on the cliff, or when two stars collide in the sky, illuminating the entire earth. These truths, however bitter, do teach us something. They teach us the true meaning of the proverb "What cannot be cured, must be endured" and life can be cured by death alone, which is far bitter than truth itself.

To understand the truth that I mention one need not renounce the world, or sit in meditation for years. A walk to the butcher's would suffice. I did the same. I went to a nearby butcher's to get chicken. I had never been to one before, for I despise the killing and rejoice in the eating. I was accompanied by an elder, my Aunt. It was a short trip and we reached our destination earlier than I had anticipated. There stood before me a house, painted in peach. The house had one door and two rooms, one behind the other. In front of the entrance, was a chicken cage. There were some chairs inside, for the customers to wait till their turn.

I asked my Aunt to fetch the chicken and decided to wait outside, presuming the inside scenario to be too much to handle. But I couldn't find peace at my allocated place either. The smell of those live hens in front of me, mingled with that of the dead ones, made it unbearable for me. However, I didn't walk away. I stood where I was and watched the hens. There were four of them left. They must have lost their comrades. One of them was being butchered at the moment. Its voice-gasping in pain, helplessness and misery, made the remaining tremble. The four had probably not gotten used to this. Or perhaps their fear had multiplied. It made me want to become a vegetarian for my entire life. Would that save them? What if the butcher didn't kill them? I imagined if a bigger and stronger species invaded and killed us for food, how it would feel. I shuddered at such a hypothetical proposition. My thoughts were disturbed by the appearance of a stray dog. He tried to get closer to the cage,

but feared my presence. Nevertheless, he got as close to the chicken cage as his courage permitted. The hens trembled again. They had huddled up at one end of the cage, and seeing the dog, they rushed toward the farther corner, in the opposite direction now. They were a threatened species. There was no freedom outside the cage. The only way to freedom was through death. The men and women, who were standing in the queue tried to shoo the dog away. But the irony was that they were the bigger predators than the dog or even the butcher. For them, nay for us, the hens are killed in thousands. We make them bleed their way to our plates. How conveniently we forget that the butter chicken we relish is but a tale of pain, torture and untimely death! Standing there and realising the bitter truths, my legs began to hurt. I went inside and sat on one of the chairs.

The inner wall of the house was not plastered. The cement had come off in chunks at many a place. It merged with the dirty floor so much that it was hard to tell between dirt and cement. The room around me was small, made smaller by the presence of an old-fashioned bed made of some cheap wood, whose legs stood on a pile of bricks. It was probably the most expensive thing the butcher had ever had. There was clutter around and underneath his bed. Every detail in the room added to its sulkiness, the only respite being a white mosquito netting that hung from above one corner of the bed. It was probably a new one. The butcher's face, I could barely see. The place was crowded. But I finally caught a glimpse of him. He was old. Time and poverty had scarred his face. My heart ached. He killed to live, to feed his children. He could never get out of this web. Even worse, he could never get his children out. That is how it is meant to be. No amount of beating or crying or praying could change that. I felt bad for him and realised that a man's life is still more precious than a dozen hens'. At the moment, I felt like buying all his hens. But I wasn't rich either. I was helpless. All of a sudden it dawned on me that each and everybody is helpless in his own way. The man, who was so finicky about the exact size of the chicken pieces, probably had a nagging wife

waiting, who would take him to task if he failed to meet her specifications. The lady who was carrying a bag full of ginger, garlic and onions, would go home to cook for many people for she had ordered two kilos of chicken. I wondered if she ever smiled. The ill-clad boy behind her was perhaps a servant of some neighbouring household. He seemed so restless. His mistress might ask him to explain his delay. We are all caught in webs. Hence, we are all the same. Sometimes, we are caught in multiple webs. Our situation then gets worse for we are both the butcher and the hen at the same time. Undoubtedly and unfortunately, the way out is the way of the hen.

I came home. As my dog heard the sound of the gate opening, he ran up to me. He almost hugged me. I felt a wave of joy sweeping me off balance. Just before a couple of minutes, I was so miserable. In the twinkle of my pet's eyes I saw a purpose, a meaning. I felt enveloped in a cloud of love. Then I saw my grandfather at his usual place in the veranda. I noticed a smile on his face, a smile that almost healed me, filled each cell of my body with a strange feeling. It felt like the world was mine, and mine alone. I felt rich. I felt content. Grandpa then broke the news. He was waiting for my return. He said to me, "The rose you had planted last week, come and see." I wondered what the matter was. That it was some good news, I was sure. I rushed to the balcony. I saw the plant. A bud had sprouted up. I felt joy gushing into my veins. The plant that I had tended with great care and much prayers, had chosen to give me back the most beautiful of all gifts in the world- a little bud! I forgot the agonising moment at the butcher's. I realised a bigger lesson that life is beautiful. It is never black nor white, but rather an array of shades. Life is multicoloured. It doesn't have to end in the way of the hen. There is a peacock way too.